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(2014)
Mark Shorter : Dry Gulch.
Boxcopy.

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Dry Gulch
New work by Mark Shorter
Performance 20 – 29 November 2014

Dry Gulch is a durational performance and installation in which the artist, Mark Shorter, occupies the pitch-black gallery space for the opening hours of the exhibition. While drawing on the vocabulary of 1970s conceptual performance art (think Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic et al.), it is also an exhibition specifically of its time and its place. It probes and, at times, illuminates (pun intended) some of the dark corners of subjective experiences in a contemporary context typically swamped by distractions and saturated with templates for self-actualisation.

The experience of entering the space is itself a confronting experience. Walking through the purpose-built zigzagging light-trap corridor into the pitch-black space beyond is immediately disorienting and disconcerting. Left groping and shuffling in the dark, the wall is the only thing that provides some semblance of orientation. The only other sensory information are the faint sounds of breathing, pacing, slurping and scraping coming from the immersive and indistinct void. It is unsettling and uncomfortable. A strong impulse is to get the hell out of there.

Then, suddenly, there is light. And there is vision. The artist and source of the sounds comes into view with the successful striking of a match. He is standing close to the opposite corner of the room, dressed in nothing but a trucker's cap and handlebar mustache. He is suckling on a prosthetic penis-cum-umbilical-cord appendage protruding from his groin. The burning match creates a flickering, fleeting self-portrait that quickly extinguishes, leaving only a disturbing afterimage burning on the retina.

Immersed once again in blackness, Shorter continues to move slowly throughout the space, sucking his prosthesis and at varying intervals attempting to light matches by scraping them against the gallery wall. His image comes and goes, with long and unprescribed periods in between. At times, he moves close enough to sense his breath, smell and physical proximity. The abrupt shifts between visuality and corporeality draw acute attention to the role of the senses, and in particular, the primacy of vision in perceptual experience.

The chiaroscuro image that Shorter creates is reminiscent of another foreboding figure, that of Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in the closing sequences of *Apocalypse Now*. Like Kurtz, Shorter is a lone figure, caught between flickering light and engulfing shadow, producing great thoughts of ambiguous ethics.

However, where Kurtz translates the monologues of his twisted intellect through language, Shorter stands speechless, perhaps pre-speech, suckling like a baby on his grotesque appendage. In the context of Australia's hyper-masculine culture, it is difficult not to read this as an image of masculine regression; a vision-questing man lost somewhere between a sexed-up music festival, post-ironic metrosexual Movember and helpless infancy.

This complex relationship between macho-menace and infantile vulnerability is amplified in the performer-audience dynamics of the blackened gallery space. It is true that the experience of walking into Shorter's domain is intimidating not just because of the vulnerability caused by the audience's deprivation of sight, but also because of Shorter's ominous masculine presence. However, the initial sense that Shorter is in complete control of the scenario, ready to ambush the naïve art viewer, is not necessarily the case. He too is vulnerable – naked and alone – and not always aware of the presence and movements of visitors to the space. He too can be ambushed. In most cases, however, viewer and artist make a silent pact to respect each other's presence, allowing anxiety, fear and anticipation to be present without obvious reaction. This is not a work that cries out for interaction and participation, but it elicits, and in many ways, requires both artist and visitor to tolerate and cultivate quiet, patient and open-minded modes of contemplation.

In this way, Shorter's performance is deeply meditative. For long stretches, Shorter is without visitors, and so maintains his sanity with a mindful awareness of his own breath, physicality and performativity in the space. Being alone with one's thoughts in the dark for this long has the potential to be a profoundly terrifying experience. What lies in that void of a place beyond the images and thoughts that constantly compete for our attention? Beyond the daily obligations, shopping lists, emails, weekly goals and even grand life ambitions, what makes up our sense of reality and what drives us to do what we do? These are questions that have recurred in art history and philosophy since Plato's Allegory of the Cave, another obvious reference point for the show. And they may be especially pertinent questions now given the hyper-realities and simulations of today's late capitalism.

Shorter's response in the age of distraction is to create a different kind of immersive experience: a sensory deprivation chamber that evokes modes of meditation and relaxation on the one hand (think vision-questing monks in desert caves), and forums of anxiety, interrogation and even torture on the other (think sex slave dungeon or Guantanamo Bay). Like Shorter's other performances, there is humour here. But unlike the camp theatricality in many of his previous works, *Dry Gulch* is decidedly dark, earnestly existential and conspicuously corporeal. It is perhaps not surprising that this combination is

deeply unsettling and troubling. We know that identity is malleable and adaptable; the rise of ironic diets, boutique exercise regimes and online alter egos tells us so. But this flexibility comes with destabilising consequences that require time and space to contemplate. Who shall we become today? And why? Shorter's exhibition is a timely and important prompt to consider what kinds of fears, anxieties and desires motivate us, and what kinds of discomfort we are willing to tolerate as we surge towards today's version of the best I can be.

Grant Stevens
December 2014